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The Megatonnage "Gap"

As if gaposis had not been done to death, a private study group composed largely of retired generals has added a new "gap" to the current geopolitical lexicon. This one is measured in the megatonnage by which Soviet nuclear firepower will supposedly exceed this country's nuclear firepower by 1971. The "gap" will be "massive," according to a report by the American Security Council prepared under the auspices of the House Armed Services Committee. What's worse, the United States is "cooperating" in the Soviet effort to outdo us by "slowing down its side of the arms race," the report contends.

When such unyielding, hard-line, ex-Air Force officers as Gen. Curtis LeMay and Gen. Bernard A. Schriver collaborate with Dr. Edward Teller and others of like persuasion in a report which is so tendentious in tone, the first impulse is to dismiss it out of hand. But for a number of reasons—not all of which would please the authors—this report ought to be carefully considered in the current debate over what the United States ought now to do about the growing threat of an endlessly spiraling nuclear arms race.

For one thing, the simple statistics in the report may well be accurate. There is considerable evidence that the Russians are indeed making a mighty effort to narrow our acknowledged lead in missiles and in effective nuclear power not only by installing some sort of limited antiballistic missile system but by a more serious effort to enlarge their offensive missile capacity. If the contest is scored in terms of sheer megatonnage, it is even quite possible that the Soviets will be on a par with us by the end of this year, and ahead of us in a few years.

The question which Secretary McNamara rightly raises is whether megatonnage is the proper test. He would argue that it definitely is not. The real question, he insists, is whether we have enough power to convince the Russians that a nuclear attack on us would be suicidal for them—and enough power to prove the point if it comes to that. The Secretary's unqualified answer is that we have this sort of capability in superabundance and that a crash effort to match the Russian buildup will not materially increase our security.

On such a technical and, happily, hypothetical issue, honest men can disagree. But before the hard-liners propel us ever onward in the nuclear arms race, other questions must be asked. Are the Russians really trying to achieve a safe and convincing nuclear lead, or do they also sense that a standoff has been achieved? And if it's the latter, is it possible the Russians are seeking a somewhat better bargaining position from which to negotiate a nuclear freeze, or even a scaling down of nuclear forces? There is evidence that at least some Soviet leaders would rather devote time and energy to other, less wasteful and less dangerous pursuits. There is also the argument, of course, that the Russians would not be trying so hard to catch up if all they wanted was some limited form of nuclear disarmament.

The point is that we now don't know, for sure. But it would seem to follow that we ought to make every effort to find out before responding with knee-jerk reflexes to a Russian buildup which may have as its motive, not nuclear war, but a nuclear truce.

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